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ABSTRACT

A preliminary study set the groundwork for exploring the challenges secondary school teachers and students face in reading texts drawn from their own culture and from cultures quite different from their own. Interviews were conducted with 89 secondary school students, and also with university teachers and secondary school teachers of African American or Anglo-European descent (or who taught courses devoted to one or more of these groups) concerning their understanding of the course aims and objectives and of specific texts of one or more of the target cultures (African American, Asian, Native American, Hispanic/Latino, and Anglo-European). Results indicated that (1) students reacted to the story or characters and did not look at the text as a cultural artifact; (2) teachers and students had few problems reading the text as long as they did not raise cultural issues concerning the texts; (3) problems understanding what they read were seen as problems with the writer or with themselves as readers, not as problems in their cultural knowledge; and (4) many teachers believed that students need to like something to be able to comprehend it. Findings suggest that teachers have not yet come to terms with how they can best influence students to see the same cultural concerns that they have, and that unless some attempt is made to give students some factual information about the background culture of texts, then the cycle of one voice, rejection of unknown voices, could continue. (The interview schedule is attached.) (RS)

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Issues in the Responses of Students to Culturally Diverse Texts: A Preliminary Study

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One of the major new thrusts in literature study in the United States is that which comes under the heading of multiculturalism. The thrust comes from a series of demands upon the curriculum, particularly that in American history and literature to include selections from the diverse cultures of the United States or the world. These demands challenge the traditional definition of Western or American culture as a melting pot of the many ethnic, religious, and linguistic subgroups and urge the exploration of the distinct cultural features of the subgroups.

Culture has a variety of meanings, depending upon the bias of the definer, but for the purposes of this paper we stipulate it to stand for a combination of a) a set of intellectual beliefs and social practices of a self-defined group of people, and b) the arts that embody those beliefs. The group can be an ethnic or geographic group. It can also be a group that defines itself by gender, sexual preference, or some other characteristic. Edward Said has noted

> ". . . culture is used to designate not merely something to which one belongs but something that one possesses, and along with that proprietary process, culture also designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture comes into forceful play" (Said, 1983, p. 8-9).

Any culture serves to distinguish its members from those of other cultures and any culture is elitist in some senses; as Said points out, "What is more important in culture is that it is a system of values saturating downward almost everything within its purview; yet paradoxically culture dominates from above without at the same time being available to everything and everyone that it dominates" (Said, 1983, p. 9). Cultures are exclusionary by definition; people who have a culture see others as outside, above, or beneath them; and certainly very few people transcend cultures to become cosmopolites. Cultures seek to incorporate their young through education, a major aspect of which involves the passing on of lore as contained in various artistic forms. For those who live in a complex society such as the United States, the purpose is not incorporation

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[1] We are grateful for the assistance of the following persons in conducting the interviews: Roseli Ejzenberg, Elba Herrero, Geoffrey Purcell, and Marta Sanchez-Rivera.

as much as understanding of the diversity of the subcultures of the larger polity.

The advocates of multicultural studies claim that literary texts come from writers who inhabit cultural contexts which shape their writing. The text is simultaneously an individual aesthetic object and a cultural document, a part of the legacy of an individual and a group. The literature of a country is the literature of men and women of all sorts of subcultures--racial, ethnic, national, regional, and local. Such texts should be read not as disembodied from their creators but as intimate parts of their culture. Reading the text is to read it in the light of what William Hazlitt called the "spirit of the age" or of the culture. Such reading tends to affirm, in part, the distinction between what E.D. Hirsch, Jr. (Hirsch, 1976) called the "meaning" of a text, that which refers to the text in cultural and authorial context, as opposed to the "significance" of the text, that which we, distant from that culture, make of it. That Shakespeare "writ not for an age but for all time" must be recast as "Shakespeare writ both for an age and for all time," so does Chinua Achebe, so does Margaret Atwood.

If schools adopt such a view of literature and its teaching, the curriculum starts from the premise that, like other pieces of art, literary texts have creators who not only inhabit, but half-create the various cultures of the world since their works become the cultural artifacts that are seen as representative of that culture. If we remember that simple fact, then we have reinstated the author and we see that texts come from a context that is rich and complex; it can best be understood within that context. As we read the text we build that context and we also use that context to help us read the text. Our discourse about the text reconstructs the text and ourselves as readers. We are not to be ignorant but clever readers relying on our own wits to come up with the clever interpretation, we are readers who strive to use our knowledge of the writer's world and to be aware of the text's relation to that world. We make connections among texts and build our canons and examine the mosaic of cultures that constitute our world.

What is important in the multicultural curriculum, particularly at the secondary level, is to provide a broad variety of texts from the diverse world cultures with some focus on their transplantation into the United States. Such a view is that of Northrop Frye (Frye, 1957), who held that all works of literature are to be held as equally valid, and that it should not be the role of criticism or the schools to rank them. In one of his last writings he summarized his definition of literature:

> ... where the organizing principles are myth, that is, story or narrative, and metaphor, that is, figured language. Here we are in a completely liberal world, the world of the free movement of the spirit. If we read a story there is no pressure to believe in it or act upon it; if we encounter metaphors in poetry, we need not worry about their factual absurdity. Literature incorporates our ideological concerns, but it devotes itself mainly to the primary ones, in both physical and spiritual forms: its fictions show human beings in the primary throes of surviving, loving, prospering, and fighting with the frustrations that block those things. It is at once a world of relaxation, where even the most terrible tragedies are still called plays, and a world of far greater intensity than ordinary life affords. In short it does everything that can be done for people except transform them. It

creates a world that the spirit can live in, but it does not make us spiritual beings. (Frye, 1991, p. 16)

In taking up Frye's definition, we see that an individual work is a part of the totality of myth; at the same time it is situated in the world from which it came. This double vision forms the paradox of literature teaching in our time.

The issue for research and curriculum development in literature, then, concerns both what texts should be included and how they should be approached. How the texts should be approached is the subject of this study. The study sets the groundwork so that we may explore the challenges faced by teachers and students in reading texts drawn from their own culture and from cultures quite different from their own, cultures that have been seen as on the margins of American society and as in the mainstream. The studies involve interviews with teachers and students at various grade levels in the light of cultural and critical traditions. The study has two parts: First, a series of interviews with teachers of multicultural literature and specialists in the literature of various subcultures, and second, a series of interviews with secondary school students to explore how they read texts from cultures other than their own.

Framework for the Study

Questions addressing the cultural differences of students as readers have been examined primarily from an international perspective (Purves, 1973), rather than from an ethnic or subnational perspective. The studies have shown that students from different cultures have learned to respond to texts according to patterns ingrained in the literature education of the culture. In literature, students clearly learned culturally approved ways of responding to what they read, seeing in the texts those aspects and features that their culture deemed important, and at the same time retaining an individual perspective on what was read. It was clear that some educational systems foster an attention to literal meaning and others to more esoteric interpretations; some focus on the content of the text, others on its style and language, still others on its historical and cultural aspects. One question for this study is, whether the kinds of differences that occur internationally also occur among distinct cultural groups within a single educational system?

A second question for the research is methodological. Most research on response to literature that has been carried on within a single culture, are the techniques and findings applicable in the context of multicultural literature teaching and learning. A summary of what is known was begun in Literature and the Reader (Purves & Beach, 1972) and has been added to in subsequent studies: the totality may be summarized in Table 1 (Main categories are in italics, subheadings or alternate definitions and expansions are in Roman).

Table 1

Understanding	Judgment	Response style	Reader type	Process of response	Satisfaction from text
Information lack	*Undifferentiated liking*	*Personal*	*Literalist*	*Identification*	*Ludic*
Cognitive failure	*Formal*	Expectation	*Associationist*	Stepping In	*Efferent/ Instrumental*
Plain sense	*Significance of content*	Defense	*Construer*	*Projection/ Introjection*	*Intellectual*
Sensuous apprehension	*Emotional impact*	Fantasy	*Interpreter*	Moving through	*Emotional*
Imagery		Transformation		*Catharsis*	*Aesthetic*
Psychological block		*Descriptive*		*Insight*	
Mnemonic irrelevancies		*Interpretive*		Stepping back	
Stock responses		*Evaluative*		Stepping out	
Sentiment					
Inhibition					
Doctrinal adhesion					
Technical presupposition					
Critical preconception					

These broad aspects of the ways scholars have analyzed response to literature give us a framework to examine the interviews and shape further research. They also help direct specific research questions. The first column raises the question of what problems in understanding seem endemic to readers when they read texts from a culture other than their own. Are the problems different from those that inhibit readers generally? The second column raises the question, "Do readers'

criteria for judging works differ when the works are outside of their culture?" The third raises the question as to whether readers shift approaches in their discourse depending on the culture of the text. The fourth raises the question as to whether different kinds of readers are the products of cultural forces or are individual. The fifth raises the question as to how the process of close identification and catharsis is modified by either the culture of the text or the culture of the reader. The sixth raises the questions as to whether the pleasures of reading a text differ depending upon the distance of the text from the culture of the reader and whether the culture prepares different kinds of readers. The answers to each of these questions have important pedagogical ramifications. This preliminary study seeks to explore the issues within each of these questions to establish the questions and issues for an in-depth survey of teachers and students.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

In order to establish a framework for exploring these questions, we have focused on the following groups: African American, Asian, Native American, Hispanic/Latino, and Anglo-European. We also included the issue of women's studies. We began by interviewing secondary school and university teachers who were either members of one of these groups or taught courses or units devoted to one or more of these groups. They offered their perspective on the problems that students face when approaching texts from outside their own culture.

Next, during the course of the 1991-92 school year, the project team interviewed students in secondary schools concerning their understanding of the course aims and objectives and of specific texts of one or more of the target cultures. The questions paralleled those asked the teacher and arose from their answers. There were 89 interviews, distributed as in Table 2.

Table 2

	Female	Male
African American	11	9
Anglo-European	45	18
Other	2	4

Labeling ethnic background proved to be problematic, as many students were of mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds. One student, for example, had been born in Korea but had been adopted by an Anglo-European family. Another student was of African American heritage but lived with her white parents. Five students described their background as mixed Native American and

European. At all times, students were allowed to choose which cultural background label they most identified with. Students were selected from six school districts, representing two rural, three urban, and one suburban system. The students were in tenth or eleventh grade and had volunteered to participate in the study.

The selections were chosen to represent variations in ethnicity of author or central figure, gender of author or central figure, and locale (urban/rural). The selections include:

The Proof - Rey Rosa: Male, Guatemala, suburban
It Happened that Day - Carmen Naranjo: Honduras, locale unnamed
The Rat in the Wall - Lawrence Yep: Chinese American, Male, rural
Nikki-Rosa - Nikki Giovanni: African American, Female, urban or suburban
How Grandmother Spider Brought the Light - Paula Gunn Allen: Native American, rural
Welcome to the Human Heart - Janet Frame: female, urban

Results

Teacher Responses

Twelve teachers who are involved in multicultural literature were interviewed following the protocol described in the previous report. These twelve teachers (chosen from a range of situations: urban college, urban high school, suburban affluent high school, suburban depressed high school, and rural high school) appeared to suggest a range of situations that would contain commonalties applicable to many teachers in many areas.

The interviews included the following topics:

1. The teaching of X literature.
To what sort of students do you teach the literature? What particular texts do you frequently use? How do you teach the literature? Is there any special way in which you teach the literature?

2. The works from X Culture.
How do you select the works? What constraints do you find on your selection? How do you generally organize the works? What particular features of the works do you focus upon?

3. The students you teach.
Describe them in terms of their background and their ethnicity. Do you find them interested in the literature of X culture? What strengths do you see in them as readers of that literature? What problems do you find they encounter frequently in dealing with these works?

In addition to the problems that they saw their students having in reading texts from other cultures, the teachers were concerned with the choices about what and how to teach that literature, as well as the constraints placed on them. Constraints on teacher choices are perceived in several arenas, such as district policy, parent and community expectations, resource limitations, and student needs and attitudes. The interviews suggest that the teachers believe that these constraints on the implementation of multicultural literature in their schools take two forms: Institutional constraints and student resistance. The two groups of constraints are by no means exclusive but impact upon each other. For example, when one teacher was asked if her district had a policy on multicultural literature, she responded: No *stated* policy. The unstated policy results in a great deal of freedom. The teachers can pick and choose what they want to teach. The administration approves books that are to be taught.... I do what I want and the parents trust me, but I don't know what they'd say if they sat in on one of my classes. I try to teach from a feminist perspective.

Institutional constraints. Institutional constraints seemed to most teachers to be more imposing than problems of student knowledge and attitude. These constraints include the following:

1. Concern about the General Purposes of the Multicultural Program: Acculturation and cultural identity as opposed to critical distance and understanding.

2. Politics and practices of text selection: Canonical literature of a given culture as opposed to non-canonical literature.

3. Teacher Background: Being part of the culture being taught as opposed to being an outsider.

Text problems and philosophical approaches were two issues that occurred in all of the teacher responses. Generally, teachers would indicate a text problem or a philosophical problem in conjunction with tensions in other areas. Text problems, for example, were usually indicative of resource and district limitations, and the teachers' concerns about philosophical approaches to pedagogy were intermingled with concerns about the district, the parents, and the students.

The teachers' discussion of restraints were often situated within a particular district and classroom. Changing districts means new constraints, which may or may not require new ways of teaching. One teacher who had changed schools expressed frustration with her new district. Her teaching philosophy, developed in an urban, multicultural setting, was at odds with the philosophy and make-up of her new environment. She had to learn new policies, new community expectations, new student attitudes, all of which meant a new understanding of herself as teacher. But most of all, she had to learn about the difference between her district's stated policies and implemented policies. When asked if her district had a specific policy towards the teaching of multicultural literature, she replied, "Everyone *knows* that the correct answer is yes, but I teach in White Bread America... using literature from other cultures is therefore a challenge."

The inclusion of literature from nonmainstream cultures is a challenge for several reasons,

the first being that it is a not a policy in most districts. For example, seven of the twelve teachers said that their districts did not have a stated policy on multicultural literature, but one of the seven said that she had to teach strictly from a district reading list. This means that reading selections are, to a certain degree, left to the individual teacher, who must then rely on his or her own knowledge about other cultures' literature in order to select texts. Often this search for other literature leads to anthologies. Anthologies are useful but, as one teacher said, sometimes the reasons for the sequence of texts in the anthology or for the selection of texts are confusing, and the mixture of genres--short stories, essays, journal entries--are perceived "with the same seriousness" by the students.

Of the other five teachers, one said that multicultural awareness was recommended but that there was no "unified attack." Four districts had stated policies on the implementation of a multicultural curriculum; three districts left curriculum decisions to the departments involved, and only one of these offered support by sending members of the faculty to conferences. The other school has had an elective system since the 1970s, with teachers creating the reading lists for their individual courses.

Many of the teachers noted some inconsistencies in policies and practice. One teacher said that although her district had no policy on multicultural literature, her principal wanted to do more of it. "But," she said, "the classics never get bumped from the curriculum. We do the other texts as supplements." And in this district, where book length texts need to be approved by the district because of "the district's fear of passages containing explicitly sexual references," most likely very few new texts will be introduced, since the "other texts" are fitted in around the "classics." So multicultural literature becomes tokenism; no one wants to really change the status quo.

Another inconsistency is the coexistence of district policy and teacher autonomy. One teacher said that "School districts ought to find out what their constituents want," implying that there was a break between district requirements and community needs. But this same teacher said that teachers in this district were free to teach what they wanted; if this were true, then policy would be a moot point, since the teachers are there to meet those needs. It appears that teachers are receiving mixed signals about their responsibilities in curriculum decisions.

The lack of stated policy on multicultural education means that there is a lack of support for the decisions that teachers do make; even in those districts where multicultural literature was part of the curriculum there was still a lack of support for the teachers who were helping to implement it. Lack of support means that teachers are often frustrated by lack of information. A department chair, who worked hard to find literature that would represent the changing population of his school, said that he could not find Afghani or Muslim literature, and that the available Latin American literature was too difficult for his students, a point echoed by a college professor. And yet other schools have no problem finding texts to suit their population, when there is a teacher who is familiar with less well-known texts of a certain culture.

Even a stated policy can be problematic. When asked how one school promoted a multicultural perspective with students, a teacher replied, "The cumulative effect of reading *A*

Raisin in the Sun, *The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass*, *The Unvanquished*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Native Son*", works that focus on male African Americans in an uncaring and unchanging European American society. In a broad multicultural program focusing on the African American experience, the "cumulative effect" could be enhanced by the inclusion of female writers, such as Alice Walker or Toni Morrison, who use the dominant society as a given as they explore familial relationships, or by such writers as Robert Hayden, Ntozake Shange whose works, as one teacher said, contain "rhythms within the words which are unique to black experience," or Marita Golden who describes her move to Nigeria to experience her American heritage. A multicultural program, as has been suggested, urges diversity.

As for parent expectations in literature class, most teachers claim that they have rarely, if ever, been questioned by parents about what they teach. Most feel trusted. But there are elements of tension, too, when teachers feel that they are breaking new ground in teaching literature, or when a teacher is aware that his or her philosophy is at odds with the community. One teacher reported, "Our classics teacher felt he had to teach some minority writers, women, mostly... [and the parents] were incensed that he would waste their children's time with such trash." But these reactions are extreme. Even this teacher, who said that she was trying, through her use of other cultures' literature, to "unseat anglocentrism and some of the factors that caused folks who live [in this wealthy district] to live here in the first place," found little resistance from the parents.

In some communities parents might argue against teachers' efforts to include works from outside the traditional canon. This resistance on the part of parents may occur predominantly in Anglo-European communities, but it is certainly not limited to them. One teacher noted that her Asian students wanted more of the "classics" which she was no longer teaching, since these texts had been preempted by the literature of other cultures. This expectation on the part of students may be attributed to parent expectations. For ethnically mixed districts, however, the community resistance might be not to the works themselves, but to the teacher. For example, one white teacher felt that the black community in which he taught saw him as unable to teach African American literature, and therefore resisted his attempts to bring in what he considered more appropriate texts.

A college professor explained how she thought parental/community expectations influence reading. In her view, Asians relate to family, Hispanics relate to religion and politics, and African Americans relate to "some sort of freedom quest." This perception of reading styles would certainly influence teaching style, and, should the perceptions hold true, then a teacher would be hard pressed to meet all of the expectations of the parents in an ethnically diverse environment.

Another constraint that influences how and what teachers teach is resources. Resources is more than money--it is ideas and knowledge about what is available and appropriate to the community. There are two comments that capture the impact of resources on multicultural education. One teacher put it succinctly: "Unavailable texts are problem texts." Another said, "[Problems occur] when we use the same stories too often, where some depressing ending can be expected. Our main problem is to find works we can use without seeming to reinforce

stereotypes." Finding good texts takes time and effort; buying them takes money.

Issues of student background. The teacher's perception of the characteristic approach of peoples of different ethnic groups that is mentioned above leads to the second broad topic and the focus of this study, the teachers' perception of student background and approach when confronted with culturally different literature. The comments by the teachers fell into two broad groups:

1. Student background: Ethnic group and political context of the environment (open or closed to new ideas)

2. Student Reading type: Wanting a definite answer as opposed to being open to exploration

There were some common themes among teachers when discussing student attitudes towards multicultural literature. Students, in general, need to like a piece in order to comprehend it; they will read their own culture and experiences into a piece, and they tend to want a "a good story line, something that's clearly delineated." They tend to resist points of view that they are unfamiliar with, ideas that they haven't heard from friends and family.

A second common theme was that social differences create different learning environments. A teacher from a rural district said, "In poor districts like ours they feel as if they are victims, and they don't want to hear about other people's suffering." A teacher from a more affluent suburb had this to say,

> "Our students can feel superior to the literature of others as long as it deals with the suffering of others, but when it presents a point of view that they can't feel sorry for, then it is not welcome by our rich students."

A teacher from an urban district, aware that many of his students worked for a living, said, "As long as [the student] can get a job, literary appreciation doesn't figure into it." And one teacher noted the disparity among students in her school.

> "Some kids are playing a game, trying to get a good grade so they can get an A and go to a good college and get a good job. The others, who aren't aiming for college, don't care.... Because nothing we read at school makes them feel important. The school's lower middle class whites get nothing from multicultural literature."

Discrepancies in student attitudes have often pose problems for teachers, and the problem is compounded in the arena of literature and the differing purposes and foci of instruction. Besides the social differences are issues of gender, philosophy, and past experiences, which create different responses to literature. For example, "Boys don't seem to think anything happens in women's stories," said one teacher. Gender issues "threaten" students, said another. An example of a philosophical problem would be the claim of a teacher who said, "Students [are] reluctant to admit that white domination was responsible for problems among natives in some stories. Students began to see that the problems of colonialism really exist, and that white imperialism has

been and is a problem." This teacher seems to suggest that literature must be seen from a Marxist viewpoint and others claim the historical or the feminist perspective. Still another view is that of one teacher, to "make students understand that there is no one interpretation but many." Even this approach to teaching has its drawbacks. As yet another teacher pointed out, "Giving voice and power to students is not easy when students don't necessarily want voice or power, or when they have to negotiate different kinds of coursework and different kinds of teachers."

In general, the teachers seemed more concerned with institutional constraints placed on their introduction of multicultural literature. Their concerns with students tended to be about the students as readers of literature generally rather than about the specific issues of facing texts from cultures different from their own.

Student Responses

The student interviews took several forms in part to determine which form could get the most extensive response. In the first interviews, students were not told anything about the piece, neither its author nor its background. Without this information, however, a great deal of time was spent helping students make some connection to the text. Students were then asked to read the text as a piece of literature from X background. They were also asked, as a prereading exercise, about preconceptions they had of a certain culture. For example, one student, when asked "What do you think a story from China will have?" replied, "Lanterns and women in hats." This prereading exercise opened up the possibility of being able to discuss the literature as a cultural piece. Some of the students were asked to write about the text first before being interviewed. The interview was then based upon the text and the written response. This approach appeared to produce a somewhat lengthier response.

The responses to the interview questions were analyzed according to a set of ten questions that were deemed important based on the original framework of Table 1 and an initial examination of the responses. These questions were in the following groups:

A. Background information

1. After reading the text, how many students asked for background information on the culture?
2. How many supplied background information about the culture?
3. How many mentioned the author?

B. Stereotyping

1. How many rejected the text as alien?
2. How many showed stereotypes about the culture in their responses?

C. Interpreting

1. How many looked for pleasant interpretations?
2. How many differentiated the two texts on a cultural basis?
3. What misunderstandings on a cultural level occurred?

D. Judging

1. What were reasons for liking or disliking the text?
2. How many identified with the piece?

In the analysis, the focus was on the presence or lack of cultural awareness. Asking students to isolate and articulate what they do not understand is asking them to perform a rather difficult task. People read to understand, and it requires a major shift in the way that students read, to explore differences, to look for things that they do not understand. Not looking for differences means not asking for information that might help one understand a text or an idea or another person. This is why the first question focuses on how many students asked for more information.

Background information. This group of questions deals with whether the students tended to treat the texts within a cultural context. They could do so either by asking about or supplying cultural information. Not many students raised the contextual issue. One student asked if the interviewer was the author of the piece, two wanted logistical information, the "who when where what," as one student put it, in order for the text to have more meaning or to make more sense. For example, one student said that she liked the poem "Nikki Rosa", and that she understood it. However, she wanted more information to place the author in a context. Was the author writing about a project in Chicago, or was the poem placed in a more suburban area? The other two, who read the Native American story, needed a great deal of information in order to make any sense at all of the text. Both said that they did not understand at all, and neither could begin to articulate just what was needed in order for the story to make sense. After reading the Chinese story, the student asked about the position of rats in Chinese folklore. She wanted to know if the rat was symbolic or if its appearance was just in the story.

A few students provided some cultural information about the background of the texts. One student simply said, "[The author] might have been an Indian" but could not explain why she thought this. Another said that the vocabulary used in Nikki Rosa was a female vocabulary; this same student recognized the Native American origins of "Grandmother Spider" because of the names. Another, also talking about "Grandmother Spider," said, "I know they're into nature."

"Nikki Rosa," the African American poem, instigated most of the offered information. Some of the information provided was inferential, as it was in the case of the student who said that the poem was about slavery days because it mentions no inside toilet. (Similarly, one student thought that the Chinese story was American because "the father got rich off of slave labor.") One student simply said, "Blacks have strong ties." Four students touched on the white/black tension embedded in the poem to some degree. One said, "We always feel we're superior to [blacks]... we have always put [them] down." Another student also noted the presence of prejudice in our society. One student said that when white people write about black people "they just go back to

your childhood and say how rough it was for you to grow up." Only one student (from Tanzania) went beyond the immediacy of the poem to extrapolate, "It explains that [when others] aren't of the same race as you are, they usually just don't understand about your life, like if they try to write a book or a movie about you, you couldn't have the same interpretation as a person of your own race would."

If the students were asked to frame the selection in a cultural conference, they did provide some information. When the interview began with the question, "This is a story from X culture. What do you expect it to contain?" many provided some information. An interesting example is the student who, when questioned about Hispanic literature, replied that she expected Mexican (*sic*) literature to contain strong family ties and many religious allusions. After reading the story, she said that the story was not Mexican because it did not have these elements. Several students said that Native Americans have legends, and one said that although the Chinese story could have been American in theme (e.g., that "the world is too crazed with money"), she knew that the painting of bad luck symbols was distinctly Chinese. Americans, she said, would have messed with the plumbing.

It would appear that this group of students generally does not even focus on the author of the literary selection they are reading; they do not often consider the creator of that text, let alone the creator in a cultural context. Out of ninety students, only fourteen mentioned the author. Nine were about "Nikki Rosa," and were statements made with reference to the speaker: "She sounds angry at white people"; "She's black, but Giovanni is not a name you hear in a lot of blacks. It sounds Italian"; "She wrote the poem when she was more successful." One looked at the juxtaposition of "Christ" and "masses" and said that the author was a very moral person and that this was a very moral poem. The rest of the answers are similar in that the identification of the author is gleaned from information in the poem and used to explain the text.

The only other references to the author were general and concerned the craftsmanship or perspective of the author but not the author as an individual. The comments were of the type: "I like how the author pulls you in"; "I like how the author prepares you for everything"; "The author had sympathy for the kid" (from a student who did not like the kid);"The author was bitter"; and "Can the children see her fear as the author does?"

In general, the students tended not to read and respond to the selections as cultural artifacts or to place them within the context of an author and a culture. The readings focused on the text itself and on the reader. If the students were provided with some cultural information or were specifically asked what they know about the context, they would volunteer what they knew, most of which was not extensive. This group of readers indeed seemed to view the text as an artifact detached from a context and to be read in terms of their own personal response.

Stereotyping. If the students did not raise cultural issues overtly as matters of knowledge and as a basis for interpretation, some of them did so in other ways. There were students who rejected the text as alien because of the experiences it described, as did the student who said, "I'm not black and I've never lived with 'no inside toilet.'" But there were also students who rejected a text because the text itself was alien, as did one student who disliked "Grandmother Spider," who

found no way to read it with any understanding, but who denied that this lack of understanding was because of a lack of background information about Native American beliefs and methods of storytelling. Instead, the story was "boring." The difference between these two responses is that the first recognizes cultural or experiential differences, whereas the other, in having no access to the text itself, does not.

A good number of students rejected texts for various reasons:
A number of white students rejected "Nikki Rosa" because they themselves were not black. Of the thirteen who originally rejected the poem, two reread the poem and found it positive, which changed their original objection.
-Three students rejected the poem because (they thought) it implied that only black people have an unhappy childhood.
-One student rejected it because she wasn't poor and did not have an "alcoholic father."
-One of the thirteen also rejected it because she does not like poetry in general; there was another student who disliked it just for that reason.
-Three students were turned off by certain words or titles, such as the title "Grandmother Spider".
-One student did not know what a buzzard was.
-One student disliked the Honduran story "The Proof" because she thought it was about a rich family, and she did not like the mother who "doesn't really do anything, she just stays home."

Two students did not like or understand Chato, the Mexican-American protagonist of one story. One did not like the Chinese story because it wasn't possible; she called it "really weird." Another did not like the mother in "The Proof." There were six rejections from the third group.

In addition to rejecting the text as a whole, a number of students mentioned or referred to stereotypes. Such references could be seen as positive or negative, and the context was important. For example, one student, when reading the Chinese story, commented that the treatment of the workers reminded him of how slaves were treated here in the United States. Some of the stereotypes were rather neutral, as in the comment, "Indian legends always have lots of symbolism" or that the "magic and mystery" of one story are typically Chinese. One said that the Hispanic story took place in the U.S. because there was mention of eyeshadow and make-up in the story. Many of the responses concerned the stereotypes of blacks available to us in American society: poor, hardworking/church-going/jazz-playing. Three students did not use these stereotypes in reacting to the poem, but mentioned that the "poor black" is a stereotype, a rather sophisticated distinction. Three students focused on the stereotypes of poverty, without bringing up the racial element of the poem. For these students, poverty was ugly regardless of location or race.

There were some stereotypes, however, that were a little more disturbing. Two students were surprised by the "normalcy" of the suburban setting in one of the Hispanic texts; one student implied that people with Hispanic names could not be American. Four students focused on the line about "your father's drinking" in "Nikki Rosa," immediately translating this into alcoholism.

The interviews do not indicate whether this translation is because of stereotypes of poverty or race, or because we are becoming a zero-tolerance society and that any mention of drinking implies abuse. One of these students also thought that the word "stock" referred to drugs, and that the father was a drug dealer.

In general, there was some stereotyping of the texts or aspects of the texts that in some cases led to rejection of the text. In other cases, it formed the basis of what I.A. Richards called a "stock response," and at worst could lead to an interpretation of the text that was questionable (Richards, 1929). Most of the stereotyping occurred in response to the African American text, perhaps because the students are more familiar with or more conscious of the stereotypes concerning that group than the other groups.

Interpreting. One phenomenon of the interpretation of literature that has long been noted by scholars is the tendency for readers to invest themselves into the work and seek to make the text pleasanter than it is. It is a form of stock response that has been called "happiness binding" (Squire, 1963). Thirty-six students gave responses of this sort, twenty-four of them involving the poem "Nikki Rosa." Eight students said that it was about black love, sixteen did not mention the negative features mentioned in the poem but said they thought the point was that, "even though she was poor, she was happy." Four students saw "Grandmother Spider" as a tale about overcoming obstacles, and three thought that the point of "You are Now Entering the Human Heart" was that the teacher finally overcame her fear of snakes. Although these "happiness-binding" answers are sometimes plausible, they also serve to obfuscate certain elements of the texts. For example, the teacher in "Human Heart" does not overcome her fear of snakes--her sense of control and of power are destroyed by the episode with the snake. While one can argue that some of the interpretations that follow this pattern can be seen as attempts to gloss over the unfair treatment described in the text as being accorded to particular ethnic groups, many of them appear to be attempts to give a pleasant interpretation to whatever is read.

Obviously, those students who looked for pleasant interpretations (see Question 5) showed a certain amount of misunderstanding, although not always on a cultural level. There were twenty-six "cultural misunderstandings" from the interview-only group. The misunderstandings can be broadly generalized into the following categories:

> -A lack of awareness of Hispanic culture, which includes an understanding of the pervasiveness of Catholicism (students focused on the killing of the bird, and missed the fact that Miguel was trying to see if God really existed), patriarchy/male bonding (as in "I don't understand why the father didn't punish the boy"), and the structure of the household (most students called the maid "housekeeper" or "cleaning lady").
> -A lack of information about Native American beliefs and storytelling. A clear example of the first is the student who dropped the "Spider" from "Grandmother Spider" because she did not know about Native American relationships with animals. An example of the second comes from the student who said that the story needed "A beginning, a middle and an end, not a middle, a beginning, and an end".

-A lack of awareness of African American literature. One student dismissed "Nikki Rosa" with an implication that African Americans only write about being unhappy. Many students felt that the poem was exclusive and resented the idea "that only black people have unhappy childhoods."
-A lack of awareness of the prevalence of poverty in the U.S. (four responses). One student said that "Nikki Rosa" happened in Africa because of the line "no inside toilets." This category could also be labeled "ethnocentric" as there was a student who thought that the mention of make-up immediately indicated that a story was American, and another who thought that the description of blue-eyed blond showed that the story was American (both of these students had read a story from Honduras).
-A form of redating the text in order to make it palatable. One student wrote that if "Nikki Rosa" had been a modern poem, the first two lines would have made her angry, but since it was set a long time ago, she wasn't angry.
-For lack of a better name, the last category is "assumption of a male voice" (three responses). Two students read "Nikki Rosa" and referred to the author as "he," and most students assumed that the observer in "Human Heart" was a male (which is a valid assumption). The assumption of voice is fine, but it begs the question, "Would we read something differently if we knew it was a woman?" Would more students have noted the snake attendant's careless ignorance of the teacher's terror if they had seen the observer as a female?

Another aspect of interpretation which might be seen as being appropriate to a multicultural approach to literature would be one that differentiated the meanings of the texts in terms of the cultural differences that are seen. This phenomenon occurred infrequently in the responses. Although the students do differentiate between the pairs of texts they read, most did not differentiate the texts on a cultural level. One student said, "Both have something to do with cultures. They're different because the story tells you that they're trying to get something. The poem seems to tell you that the person is unhappy." A second student also tried to compare cultures and ended up comparing the "fantasy" of one text with the "reality" of the poem. Another, in response to a request to compare, replied, "They both had their difficulties, but they came from different backgrounds. I don't think her mother [in "Nikki Rosa"] is really worried about make-up or getting dressed up but hers [from "It Happened that Day"] is." This is a comparison based more on economics than on culture.

Judging. Because the students were asked to rate the texts they read, and most seemed eager to talk about their personal reactions, there were a number of responses that dealt with judgment. Some of the judgments dealt with style, and some with content, but most with personal impact and identification. The stylistic criteria included: liking the story either because of a neat ending, the language used, or because it was familiar and therefore accessible. Students disliked a text because it was "boring and had no meaning," "boring and dragged on and on," confusing," or "too realistic and depressing." A few students mentioned the ending, the w rding or the symbolism; one disliked the ending and would have changed it, while another disliked the story because it wasn't possible.

Their reasons for liking the content of a text varied. Many liked "Nikki Rosa" because "it had a point" and "told the truth." Two mentioned liking a text because of the fear that a certain character felt. Two disliked poems in general, and two disliked characters in the story enough to dislike the entire text. One student said that he liked a text because it was modern and about an everyday kid, which he liked. Another liked a story because "it gave me a picture as I was reading it."

Many of the judgments dealt with the impact of the story and the students' ability to identify with the characters, the culture, or the situation. There were two who could relate to the story and who therefore liked it: "I like Indian culture" and "She's black like me." Two identified with the poem because they themselves were black, two responded to the text because of their own childhood memories, one identified with the teacher of "Human Heart" because she herself was scared of snakes, and one identified with a statement that indicated that women often change their looks, eyes, and make-up. One student identified with the Chinese story, saying, "I know people who get rich and feel superior." There was one identification with a text because of childhood memories and race. Two students identified with young Chato de Shamrock because of his need for his friends, and one young white male identified with "Nikki Rosa" because his own father was in prison (although the father in the poem is not in prison) and his family was struggling to stay together. One identified with "Nikki Rosa" because it was about a girl trying to be strong.

It seems clear that identification is an important contributor to both understanding and to judgment, although the identification may at times be a form of projection into the text rather than introjection of the text into the reader's world.

Discussion

It should be clear that these students responded to literature on a personal basis. Even when told that a text is from another culture, students do not look at the text as a cultural artifact. Instead, they react to the story or to the characters therein. If they can identify with something or someone in the text, there is a chance that they will like the text. If they understand little or find little to identify with, then they will not like it. They tend to ignore the author and the location of the text in their stated responses.

The research thus far conducted does not fully answer the question, what problems seem endemic to the understanding of readers? It appears that the readers have few problems as long as they do not raise cultural issues concerning the texts. They have problems understanding what they read, but these they see as problems with the writer or with themselves as readers, not as problems in their cultural knowledge. The teachers also fail to mention their lack of knowledge or that of their students. With reference to the other questions, the research thus far suggests that, because students do not perceive cultural differences, they change neither their criteria for judging what they read, nor their discourse concerning texts. Nor do they experience pleasure or displeasure according to the culture aspect of the text. There is some evidence that the students' close identification with the texts is hampered by cultural difference and that when

a text is from a different culture, they seek to accommodate it to their own view of the world. This phenomenon is also described by some of the teachers.

When the interviews with both teachers and students are analyzed for common themes, the issue of the link between liking and comprehension is unavoidable. It appears that many teachers are of the belief that students need to like something in order to comprehend it. And yet, one should really ask which comes first, liking or comprehension. Students disliked texts that were "boring," and these were generally texts that they did not understand and did not have access to. Lack of comprehension generally means that the initial reaction will be one of dislike. But many students, after discussing the text with the interviewer, changed their opinion about the text. When students were given access through a text, they liked it.

The question then becomes, how teachers can make texts more accessible to students and therefore more acceptable to them. One answer is to clarify cultural misunderstandings, which could be placed into four main categories: a lack of awareness of the Hispanic culture; a lack of information about Native American beliefs and storytelling; ethnocentric thinking; and the assumption of a male voice. The first two categories may reflect the teacher's own deficits; teachers themselves may not have a great deal of knowledge about other cultures. And yet in spite of the students lack of knowledge, they do not see that such a lack is a problem and they do not ask for more information about the background culture of the text. Instead, students would rely on their own knowledge to understand a text, and generally this knowledge included misinformation. The teachers appeared unwillingly or unable to supply appropriate information.

The problem with making multicultural texts accessible is twofold. First, teachers teach from a canon, whether or not they recognize this fact, and may be prejudiced against works from outside of the canon (Purves, 1992). Their position with respect to texts results in part from the way they have been taught to view texts and their interpretation of them (Purves, 1973, 1980). Teachers who brought up the issue of gender, and the students who assumed a male voice for the female story, show that many students are still being taught that the dominant voice in our society is still white European male. One may well wonder how easily can a new reading list (or canon) can be implemented, one that is a natural counterpoint to the standard voice--with both female and minority authors and protagonists? Before education can be multicultural, there must first be recognition that a dominant voice persists and that literature is generally taught in that voice.

The second problem is that teachers also find it difficult to approach "other" texts with new eyes. Each teacher interviewed had his or her own way of teaching, depending on the student needs, the school environment, and the teacher's own experience with literature. When given a text to teach, the teacher would work it into his or her own framework which tended to focus on reader response or literary criticism. Few teachers possessed the necessary training or support needed to teach the texts as cultural artifacts. At the same time, many teachers expressed such a desire and said that the purpose of teaching literature was to create a better world, or at least that there are other points of view, it follows that the texts used to do so should be taught from that point of view.

Most teachers described the use of response writing and small group discussions as ways

to facilitate understanding a text, and yet only one teacher, the university professor, talked about how she or he "explained" the culture to students. In fact, one teacher said that she wanted her students to come to their own conclusions, that she did not tell her students "This is how Japanese or Indians think." Making an effort not to explain a culture appears to have its dangers in that students will perpetuate their own myths and misconceptions about "others," and one point of multicultural education--that of learning about other viewpoints--is lost.

The teachers, of course, are products of their own education, and few have had courses in multicultural literature. The interviews with the teachers appears to suggest that they have not yet come to terms with how they can best influence students to see the same cultural concerns that they have. The interviews with students suggest that unless some attempt is made to give students some factual information about the background culture of texts, then the cycle of one voice, rejection of unknown voices, could continue.

On the basis of this preliminary study, it is clear that a more focused set of interviews is needed to explore precisely what sorts of information and guidance students and teachers might need. Of particular importance is the degree to which the personalizing of the response and the desire for identification with the text hampers students' ability to read texts from other cultures. Also important is the influence of happiness binding in their reading of texts from cultures other than their own. Of greatest importance is the suggestion raised in the interviews that since students tend to read texts out of their own experience, they have trouble reading texts from cultures other than their own. They appear to have little knowledge of other cultures and little practice in reading literature as the expression of a culture and an author who is influenced by her culture. Since the cultural background of the students in this preliminary study is limited, it is important to get a picture of this phenomenon from a broader perspective.

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Appendix 1

Interview Schedule

Identifying Code: School#
Grade#
Student#

First I would like to ask some questions about you.

Please tell me how old you are

Gender

Ethnic Background

Do you speak any languages other than English?

Have you travelled much?

Now I would like to ask some questions about your reading.

1. Do you and your family have many books at home?

2. What magazines does your family get regularly?

3. Do you watch much television?
   What sorts of shows do you watch?
   Do you rent videos? What kinds? How often?

4. Do you like to read?
   What sorts of things do you read?
   About how many books do you read on your own in a year?
   On what basis do you choose books to read?
   What magazines do you read regularly?

5. What kinds of books and stories do you like to read for English class?
   Name some titles or authors that you have particularly liked.

6. What sorts of stories and books that you are assigned do you really dislike?
   Name some titles or authors that you have particuarly disliked.

7. In English class, what sort of ways are used to teach literature? Are there any practices/ways of teaching that you especially like? Are there any that you dislike?

Now I would like you to read this selection. You may mark it as you go through it if you want to. Then I will ask you some questions about it.

1. What is the name of the selection?
   Would you have stopped reading if I weren't here?

2. Could you tell us what you make of it?

3. Were there any particular parts of it you didn't understand? Which were they?

4. Were there any parts of it you particularly liked? Show me and tell me about them.

5. Were there any parts of it that particularly bothered you? Show me and tell me about them.

6. What do you need to make sense of this story?
   What helped you make sense of this story?
   While you were reading, did you try to figure out where the story took place?

7. Rate this story from 0 (one of the worst you have read) to 5 (one of the best you have read). Why did you give it that rating?

8. Compare the two pieces. Do you see any similarities or differences? Any stereotypes?

9. Who do you think the author is? (M/F, nationality)